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ABSTRACT

Information concerning social relations after widowhood has frequently been analyzed without explicit knowledge of such conditions before widowhood. Longitudinal data from a national survey of low-income aged (N=4494) was analyzed to assess the social impact of widowhood on older persons. Widows interviewed in 1973 and again in 1974 were classified into three categories according to the length of their widowhood and compared to married persons on measures of family, friend, and neighbor interaction. Findings indicated that the recently widowed, while manifesting stability in family and friend relations, exhibited more interaction with neighbors than married persons. Respondents widowed more than four years manifested lower levels of family interaction, suggesting that the maintenance of family relations in later life is more difficult for those widowed early in life. An examination of the effects of sex and race on social interactions among the elderly revealed higher social participation among males than females, and greater neighboring activity among non-whites than whites. Non-whites also scored higher than whites on measures of friend and realtive interaction. (Author/NRB)

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# THE IMPACT OF WIDOWHOOD ON THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF OLDER PERSONS: A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS*

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# THE IMPACT OF WIDOWHOOD ON THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF OLDER PERSONS: A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS

Widowhood has generally been recognized as one of the major events in the life course of married persons. Recently, a considerable amount of research has been done to assess the impact of widowhood on the morale and social participation of elderly widows. Social scientists in a variety of disciplines have repeatedly stressed the importance of support networks in enabling the newly widowed person to adjust to this major life event. This study examines the impact of widowhood on the family, friend, and neighbor relations of the elderly from a longitudinal perspective. In particular, we are interested in whether or not widowhood reduces the social interaction of older persons.

In considering the family life of older people, Ethel Shanas (1979a; 1979b) has supported the notion that the family remains the primary basis of security for the normal American adult. Lopata (1973; 1979) has observed that families are generally helpful to widows in adjusting to the death of their spouse. Yet, research by Bock and Webber (1972) suggests that family interaction declines upon the death of the spouse, especially for aged widowers (see also Pihlblad and Adams, 1972).

In her study of Chicago area widows, Helena Lopata (1973) claims that the average frequency of interaction with adult children is relatively low. In addition, low-income and/or black widows are the least likely to have regular contact with their children. Though more aid and support is generally received from children than from siblings and other relatives, the latter, when available, frequently contribute to the well-being of aged widows (Shanas, 1979b).

A number of researchers have noted the importance of friendship as a support system for the elderly widow (Arling, 1976; Hess, 1972; Lopata, 1970, 1973, 1975, 1979; Petrowsky, 1976; Powers and Bultena, 1976). The voluntary nature of friend relations allows for the maximization of beneficial associations and the minimization of undesirable ones. Unlike family relations which are frequently obligatory, friendship is generally volitional and characterized by biographical homophily (Hess, 1972; Simmel, 1955). The similarity of personal characteristics and experiences of friends provides for the possibility of relatively equal exchanges between individuals (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974).

In comparing similar cohorts of elderly married and widowed persons, it has generally been found that those who are still married have higher rates of interaction with friends (Berardo, 1970; Blau, 1961, 1973; Lopata, 1973). It has been suggested that the married state provides the couple with a pool of potential friendship choices that is greater than the opportunities for friend association for either widowed or never married elderly persons (Hess, 1972). Couple interaction is frequently leisure oriented and widows generally find it difficult to maintain former couple relationships in this atmosphere. In addition, it has been noted by Lopata (1973) that friendship participation is positively related to educational achievement among widows.

Though many times taken for granted, neighbors of older people, especially in congregate living environments, are a valuable source of social support (Carp, 1966; Rosow, 1967). Hochschild (1973) reported extensive contact and support among widows in an apartment complex for the aged. In a study of community residents in South Carolina, Arling (1976) discovered a positive relationship between the availability of neighbors that a widow knew well enough to visit and morale. Lopata (1973) has also noted the importance of neighbors' aid in the process of adjusting to widowhood.

While previous research on widowhood has provided the scientific community with many insights and explanations for understanding this major life event, there is still considerable divergence among researchers with regard to several issues. For example, studies by Berardo (1970) and Pihlblad and Adams (1972) indicate that the death of spouse has a more detrimental effect on the social relations of elderly males than elderly females. However, Atchley (1975: 177) states that "In terms of differences between married and widowed people, widowhood increases the incidence of social participation among men, but it decreases social participation among former women teachers." Also, while both Lopata (1973) and Arling (1976a; 1976b) found that black widows have less frequent contact with their children, their general findings differ with regard to the relationship between race and neighboring activities.

After considering the divergence of empirical findings on the subject, there are obviously many reasons for such discrepancies. We suggest two as the major reasons for the lack of empirical generalizations on widowhood in later life. First, many of the studies have not used a multivariate analysis. While research has genera'ly found relationships between the impact of widowhood and sex, race, health, age, education, and the amount of time since the spouse's death, few studies have assessed the independent effects of these variables when the others are controlled. Second, almost all of the studies on widowhood have used cross-sectional designs. In other words, most studies analyze information concerning social relations after widowhood without explicit knowledge of such characteristics before widowhood. While cross-sectional designs are most appropriate for some types of research, the use of such studies in understanding changes due to life events must be approached with caution (Botwinick, 1978). In an attempt to deal with this problem, Lopata's (1973) research utilzed

retrospective questions to examine the changes in social life since widowhood. However, it should be pointed out that retrospective questions have been found to be somewhat unreliable (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1976). A better approach for assessing the impact of a life event on social functioning is through the use of a longitudinal design (for an example, see George and Maddox, 1979).

The present investigation examines the impact of widowhood on the elderly's social relations with particular regard for the amount of time since the death of the spouse. A longitudinal design is utilized which controls for the effects of several personal characteristics, as well as previous levels of social interaction.

## DATA AND METHODS

The data analyzed in this paper are from the Survey of the Low-Income Aged and Disabled (SLIAD), conducted in 1973 and 1974 by the Bureau of the Census for the Social Security Administration (Tissue, 1977). Though the original survey included four subsamples, the present study uses only the two aged subsamples: The welfare aged and the current population survey (CPS) of the low-income aged.[1] Using the aged respondents only, a stratified, multi-stage clustered design resulted in a total of 8,594 cases in 1973. Since no new cases were drawn to replace those lost due to attrition, a total of 7,641 cases completed the 1974 interview. This analysis is based upon the 4,494 older married and widowed persons who completed the follow-up interview and were married only once. While the use of this low-income survey definitely limits the generalizability of the study, it does permit a longitudinal analysis. In addition, it has been pointed out by Atchley

(1975) and Tissue (1979) that the failure to control for economic factors has been one of the major weaknesses of many studies of widowhood. Restricting the range of personal income offers some support that the observed differences in social interaction are not simply the result of income variance (Tissue, 1979).

Since the work of Pihlblad and Adams (1972; see also Lopata, 1973) indicates the importance of considering the amount of time since the death of the spouse in studying widowhood, the respondents were divided into four categories: those widowed between the two measurements (N=109); those widowed more than 1 year and less than or equal to 4 years before time two (N=477); those widowed more than 4 years before time two (N=2,294); and those married at both time one and time two (N=1,614). This classification allows for the examination of "before" and "after" measures for the category of newly widowed persons in comparison to those who are still married. In addition, it enables us to examine the social relations of the two categories widowed before the first interview at two points in time. While the use of four years as a cutting point for classifying those respondents widowed before the first interview is entirely arbitrary, it seemed most appropriate to follow the work of Pihlblad and Adams (1972) which indicates that this is a meaningful demarcation.

In attempting to assess the degree of social interaction, all respondents were asked about how often they got together in person with: (a) a neighbor, (b) a friend or acquaintance who isn't a neighbor, and (c) a relative (not counting relatives in the household or their own children). Responses on these items ranged from (1) not applicable--has none to (9) every day.[2] In addition, those respondents who earlier indicated that they had living children were asked the following question: "About how often do you get together personally with the child you see most often (excluding children

who live here with you)?" Responses on this item were similar to the other measures but ranged from (1) less than once a year, never to (8) everyday.

Race and sex were coded as dummy variables. Whites and females were scored zero while non-whites and males were scored one. Age was operationalized as number of years old at the time of the first interview. Education was coded as the number of completed years of schooling up to 17 years; 18 equals 18 years or more.

Perceived health at time two was measured by responses to the question, "Generally speaking, would you describe your present health as (1) excellent, (2) good, (3) fair, or (4) poor?" The scoring on this item is indicated in the parentheses, and 12 respondents were deleted from the analysis because of "Don't know" responses.

The data analysis began with paired t-tests to examine differences in the various types of social interaction for each of the four categories of marital status. Next, correlation and regression techniques were utilized in a multivariate framework. Though the computation of change or difference scores on the measures of social interaction may seem like an appealing approach for noting differences between the two interviews, such scores have been found to be highly unreliable because they are "systematically related to any random error of measurement" (Cronbach and Furby, 1970: 68). Instead, an alternative approach suggested by several researchers is to regress the time two measure on the identical time one measure and other variables of interest (Bohrnstedt, 1968; Cronbach and Furby, 1970: Pendleton et al., 1979).[3] This procedure was utilized in a hierarchical design to generate separate equations for each type of social interaction. Following the suggestion by Cronbach and Furby (1970) the time one measure was entered into the equation first. Age was the second variable to be

entered, followed by the remaining variables so that their effects could be examined net of the effects of the time one measure and the age of the respondent.

## RESULTS

General findings. - Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and t-values for differences in each type of social interaction between the

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Table 1 about here

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two interviews by the classification of marital status. For those older persons who remained married between the 1973 and 1974 interviews, significant differences emerged on two types of interaction. The married respondents' interaction with friends decreased between the measurements, while those with children living outside their home increased the frequency of their personal contacts. Though it is not altogether clear why these changes took place, it may suggest a realignment or substitution (Hess, 1972) of social participation among elderly couples who sense the importance of spending time with their children. There were no significant differences during the study time on any type of social interaction for either those respondents who were widowed in this time period or those who were widowed between one and four years. However, decreases in interaction with neighbors, friends, and relatives were observed for those respondents who were widowed for more than four years. Yet, their frequency of contact with children did not significantly differ between the two measurements.

Overall, the bivariate analysis points to stability rather than change in the social relations of those who have been recently widowed (i.e. those

widowed between measurements and those widowed between one and four years). Yet, for those who have been widowed more than four years, a decrease in social interaction is noted on several measures.

Multivariate Analysis. - In order to simultaneously examine the effects of previous levels of social interaction and several personal variables, we turn to a multiple regression analysis. Table 2 reports both the unstandardized (B) and standardized ($\beta$) regression coefficients for the models of each type of social interaction.[4]

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Table 2 about here

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An examination of the equation for neighbor interaction reveals considerable stability between the two interviews. After controlling for the previous level of neighbor interaction, more frequent contact with neighbors is observed among those respondents who are younger, male, and non-white. In addition, those elderly who perceive themselves as having better health are more likely to be engaged in frequent contact with neighbors. Most interesting is the observation that in comparison with married persons, higher degrees of contact with neighbors are manifested among those widowed between the two measurements (B=.517) and those widowed between one and four years (B=.256). The importance of controlling for the personal characteristics which mediate the impact of widowhood is clearly noted, since such a relationship was not evidenced in the bivariate analysis.

In the equation for friend interaction, once again the younger and male respondents are involved in more frequent social contacts. As expected, there is a positive relationship between education and friend interaction. Also, non-whites and those rating their health more favorably are more likely

to be in frequent contact with friends. However, none of the widowed categories significantly differed from the married respondents in the degree of friend interaction. For future research it may be helpful to briefly note the different signs of these coefficients even though they are not statistically significant. While the coefficients for those widowed between measurements (B=-.081) and those widowed more than four years (B=-.055) indicate a slightly lower level of friend interaction, the respondents widowed between one and four years score slightly higher on friend interaction (B=.163). This suggests the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between friend interaction and the amount of time since widowhood.

The two remaining equations deal with family interaction. Upon examining the effects of the independent variables in the first equation, there is a negative association between education and interaction with relatives. Furthermore, interaction with relatives is more frequent among blacks than whites. In comparing the widowed and married persons, it is important to recognize that those persons widowed more than four years interact less frequently with relatives (B=-.237). Turning to the equation for child interaction, we note that both age and education negatively affect the frequency of getting together with children. Also, those respondents widowed more than four years manifest lower levels of contact with their children (B=-.146) than married persons.

By considering both relative and child interaction as types of family interaction, several other observations can be made. First, whereas education was positively related to friend interaction, it is negatively related to family interaction. Though considered a resource in friendship among the elderly, education apparently has a negative effect on family

interaction. Second, while sex differences exist in the aged's interaction with neighbors and friends, no such differences are observed in family interaction. Third, though the degree of neighbor and friend interaction is affected by the respondents' evaluation of their health, family relations are not similarly affected. From this data it appears that while the maintenance of neighbor and friend relations is conditional on the level of perceived health, family relations endure regardless of the older person's subjective health condition. Finally, though the respondents who were widowed more than four years were less likely to be in contact with family members, the comparison between these respondents and married persons with regard to neighbor and friend interaction was not significant.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research has been to assess the impact of widowhood on the social relations of the elderly from a longitudinal perspective. Since the national sample studied was drawn from the low-income elderly, some caution is necessary when attempting to generalize the results to the entire elderly population.

Examining the simple relationships between the measures of social interaction for each classification of marital status points overwhelmingly toward stability rather than change among the recently widowed. In addition, for those respondents who have been widowed for more than four years, a general trend of decreasing social contact is apparent. However, in comparing the widows to married persons and applying appropriate controls, several of these relationships were modified. Thus, our analysis supports the work of George and Maddox (1979; see also House, 1974) which demonstrates

the importance of considering variables which condition and mediate the consequences of life events in a multivariate framework.

A somewhat surprising finding is that higher levels of neighbor interaction are manifested among those widowed between the two interviews, as well as those widowed between one and four years. This represents an interesting area for future research especially since relatively little attention has been paid to understanding the role that neighbors play in aiding widows' adjustment. Though it may be easily conceived that neighbor interaction would be higher immediately after the death of one's spouse, it appears that such interaction continues for several years.

One of the most important findings of this study is the general stability of the recently widowed in regard to family and friend relations. Rather than exhibiting change in their level of interaction, the recently widowed appear to maintain a personal equilibrium in their relations with family and friends. This suggests the importance of a continuity theory of widowhood in later life. It is interesting to note that Atchley (1972) has already noted the importance of continuity theory in the study of retirement. Such a general model seems appropriate to the study of major life events, including widowhood, since it emphasizes a life-span developmental view of personal adjustment.

In considering those older persons who have been widowed more than four years, lower levels of family interaction are manifested in comparison to those still married. While these widows do not significantly differ from the married respondents in their contacts with neighbors and friends, they are less likely to be in frequent contact with their children or other relatives. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that as a person ages, the probability of being widowed increases. Accordingly, when considering

widowed persons, the number of years widowed generally increases with age. In this analysis lower levels of family interaction among those widowed more than four years exist after the effects of age have been controlled. Thus, these results lead us to conclude that the younger a person is when widowed the less likely it will be for them to interact frequently with family members in old age. This finding is in accord with previous research which indicates that individuals who have been widowed earlier in life have a more difficult time in maintaining their social relations (Atchley, 1975b).

With regard to the effects of sex and race on social interaction among the elderly, several observations are in order. First, no support is found for the results of others (e.g., Berardo, 1970; Pihlblad and Adams, 1972) which indicate that widowhood has a more detrimental effect on the social relations of men than women. In fact, while no differences were observed on measures of family interaction, males expressed higher degrees of neighbor and friend interaction once the effects of the other variables were controlled. This research strengthens the results of Atchley (1975a) who found higher social participation among males than females. Second, future research should not underestimate the support systems of the non-white elderly widow. Our results concur with the work of Arling (1976b) who found greater neighboring activity among non-whites (blacks) than whites. Also, this research showed that non-whites scored higher than whites on measures of friend and relative interaction. This is especially important since Jackson (1970) has previously questioned the conception of aged blacks as having weak family structures and assistance patterns.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, longitudinal data from a national sample of the low-income elderly were used to examine the impact of widowhood on the respondents' social relations. By comparing widows and married persons the findings indicate that the recently widowed, while manifesting stability in family and friend relations, exhibit higher rates of interaction with neighbors. Also, respondents widowed more than four years manifested lower levels of family interaction when other factors, including age, were controlled. Therefore, this research indicates that the maintenance of family relations in later life is most difficult for those who have been widowed early in life. In addition, the findings emphasize the utility of a continuity theory of widowhood and the importance of examining the consequences of personal factors which mediate the impact of life events.

## NOTES

1. The welfare subsample consisted entirely of old-age assistance (OAA) recipients, while the CPS subsample consisted of low-income aged drawn from the case rolls of the Bureau of the Census. As expected, a comparison of these aged subsamples with 1974 national census data indicates that lower levels of educational achievement and a higher proportion of minority elderly exist in the SLIAD subsamples. For a detailed description of the sampling procedures, see Barron (1978).

2. The exact coding for the responses is as follows: (1) not applicable--has none, (2) less than once a year, never, (3) once a year, (4) a few times a year, (5) once a month, (6) a few times a month, (7) once a week, (8) a few times a week, and (9) every day.

3. Pendleton et al. (1979) suggest a slightly different procedure in cases where multicolinearity among ratio variables is a problem. However, our analysis was not affected by either of these concerns.

4. Since 8.27% of the respondents relocated between the two interviews, it seemed worthwhile to examine these effects. However, since the coefficient for those who moved was not significant in any of the four regression equations, this variable was deleted from the analysis.

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Table 1. Differences in Type of Social Interaction Between Measurements by Classification of Marital Status (Paired t-tests)

| | | 1973 | | 1974 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | $\bar{X}$ | SD | t-value |
| Married at Both Measurements | | | | | | |
| Neighbor | 1611 | 6.503 | 2.514 | 6.400 | 2.439 | 1.55 |
| Friend | 1604 | 5.442 | 2.359 | 5.228 | 2.335 | 3.24* |
| Relative | 1609 | 5.640 | 2.450 | 5.536 | 2.398 | 1.48 |
| Child | 1355 | 5.814 | 1.952 | 5.921 | 1.893 | -2.62* |
| Widowed Between Measurements | | | | | | |
| Neighbor | 109 | 6.321 | 2.293 | 6.624 | 2.387 | -1.29 |
| Friend | 109 | 5.147 | 2.523 | 4.835 | 2.463 | 1.17 |
| Relative | 109 | 5.752 | 2.480 | 5.606 | 2.423 | .49 |
| Child | 85 | 6.058 | 2.002 | 6.151 | 1.943 | - .56 |
| Widowed Between 1 & 4 Years | | | | | | |
| Neighbor | 477 | 6.623 | 2.587 | 6.558 | 2.450 | .55 |
| Friend | 475 | 5.352 | 2.472 | 5.236 | 2.440 | .88 |
| Relative | 475 | 5.903 | 2.527 | 5.794 | 2.462 | .84 |
| Child | 390 | 5.859 | 2.067 | 5.982 | 1.992 | -1.65 |
| Widowed More Than 4 Years | | | | | | |
| Neighbor | 2282 | 6.378 | 2.728 | 6.151 | 2.721 | 4.02* |
| Friend | 2281 | 5.008 | 2.552 | 4.842 | 2.455 | 2.71* |
| Relative | 2283 | 5.499 | 2.648 | 5.199 | 2.546 | 4.99* |
| Child | 1749 | 5.637 | 2.103 | 5.643 | 2.056 | - .14 |
| Total | | | | | | |
| Neighbor | 4479 | 6.448 | 2.629 | 6.295 | 2.590 | 3.82* |
| Friend | 4469 | 5.203 | 2.483 | 5.022 | 2.419 | 4.30* |
| Relative | 4477 | 5.599 | 2.564 | 5.394 | 2.490 | 4.81* |
| Child | 3580 | 5.738 | 2.043 | 5.797 | 1.991 | -2.23* |

*Indicates $p<.05$ (2-tailed)

Table 2. Regressions of Time Two Measures of Social Interaction on Identical Time One Measures and Personal Characteristics

| | Independent Variables | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Unstandardized Regression Coefficients-B (Standardized Regression Coefficients -β) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dependent Variables[a] (Intercepts) | Time One[b] Measure | Age | Sex | Education | Race | Perceived Health | Widowed Between Measurements | Widowed Between 1 and 4 Years | Widowed More than 4 Years | $R^2$ | N |
| Neighbor Interaction (4.411) | .452* (.459) | -.011* (-.029) | .183* (.034) | .004 (.006) | .284* (.042) | -.101* (-.035) | .517* (.032) | .256* (.031) | -.002 (-.000) | .223 | 4128 |
| Friend Interaction (5.076) | .300* (.306) | -.019* (-.052) | .277* (.053) | .055* (.084) | .305* (.047) | -.220* (-.081) | -.081 (-.005) | .163 (.021) | -.055 (-.011) | .135 | 4128 |
| Relative Interaction (4.219) | .351* (.360) | -.006 (-.016) | -.011 (-.002) | -.021* (-.031) | .340* (.051) | -.046 (-.016) | .074 (.005) | .170 (.021) | -.237* (-.048) | .142 | 4128 |
| Child Interaction (2.769) | .674* (.693) | -.008* (-.027) | -.064 (-.015) | -.030* (-.056) | -.048 (-.009) | .030 (.013) | .041 (.003) | .009 (.001) | -.146* (-.037) | .498 | 3329 |

NOTE: The range of child interaction is from 1 to 8. All other measures of social interaction range from 1 to 9. Listwise deletion of missing data was used.

[a]All dependent variables are measured at time two (1974).

[b]Time one measure refers to a different variable in each equation since it is the identical 1973 measure of the dependent variable.

*Indicates $p<.05$.